DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 736 CS 504 744

AUTHOR Mayer, Michael E.
TITLE Changing the Debate Format: A Mechanism to Control the Spread.
PUB DATE Feb 85
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Fresno, CA, February 16-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; *Debate; Higher Education; Judges; *Persuasive Discourse; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Debate Format; *Spread (Debate)

ABSTRACT

Although a good deal of the controversy over debate strategy versus substance has been on the construction of both affirmative and negative cases, the most widespread concern is with the use of the "spread." Debate scholars argue that the spread can be misused in two somewhat similar ways. The strategic spread, in which a large number of somewhat developed arguments is presented, is used to attempt to force the opposition to misallocate its time. The goal of the tactical spread, in which a relatively large number of undeveloped responses to an argument are given, is to avoid debate. Since the affirmative can postpone its choice of which of the six advantages to emphasize until the second affirmative rebuttal (after which the negative is compulsorily silent), an enormous tactical advantage can be gained by concentrating on those elements of the affirmative case about which the negative has said the least. While these two forms of the spread can be differentiated from one another, they are generally used together. Scholars argue that both judging practices and debate format are two potential sources of the spread. A format using eight-minute constructives and seven-minute rebuttals might well reduce the effects of both the strategic and the tactical spread. Other variations in format that lengthen rebuttals at the expense of the constructives might also prove useful in reducing the lack of clarity that results from misuse of the spread. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED250736

CHANGING THE DEBATE FORMAT:

A MECHANISM TO CONTROL THE SPREAD

by

Michael E. Mayer

Department of Communication
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287

Submitted to

the Western Forensics Association

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael E. Mayer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 744

Abstract

The substitution of strategy for substance in academic debate has concerned communication scholars for many years. One example of debate strategy is the spread. This paper argues that the spread could be controlled by changing the lengths of the constructive and rebuttal speeches.

The tendency of competitive debate to foster strategy over substance is one of the oldest concerns in communication. For example, in 1916, Pelsma indicated that "Long main speeches and relatively short rebuttals turn a debate into a declamation contest."[1] More recent scholars have expressed similar concerns. In justifying an alternative debate format, Brock and Fieldman argued that:

> (B)oth teams have learned to shift their positions late in the debate to avoid the strong arguments of their opponents rather than to answer them directly. The overall effect has been for the affirmative to spend a disproportionate amount of time early in the debate on the reason for change, and the negative to emphasize plan attacks and disadvantages later in the debate--resulting in teams debating past each other rather than engaging in direct confrontation.[2]

Although a good deal of the controversy of strategy versus substance has been on the construction of both affirmative and negative cases,[3] the most widespread concern is with the use of the "spread." This paper will discuss the misuse of the spread and its sources, propose solutions and evaluate those solutions.

Misuse of the Spread

Debate scholars argue that the spread can be misused in two somewhat similar ways. It may be misused either strategically, by presenting a large number of somewhat developed arguments, or tactically, by presenting a relatively large number of undeveloped responses to an argument. In demonstrating the former, Arnold argued that:

> The specific affirmative case under discussion here is a perfect example of the garbage spread which relies on speed

and trickery rather than solid argumentation. The basic purpose of this affirmative strategy (presenting six advantages) is to avoid debate on the issues. . . . Since the affirmative can postpone its choice of which of the six to emphasize until the second affirmative rebuttal, after which the negative is compulsorily silent, they can gain an enormous tactical advantage by concentrating on those elements of the affirmative case about which the negative has said least. The goal is to avoid debate.[4]

In a more general sense, Balthrop complained that "(I)n many others (debates) I have heard, teams will choose to present as many positions as possible in the hopes that, after shots are fired in all directions, something will draw blood."[5] As Arnold indicated, the strategic spread is used in an attempt to force the opposition to misallocate its time. He wrote: "Six advantages are presented in the hope that the negative, under time pressure, will give inadequate consideration to one or another."[6]

Tactically, the spread is used to present as many responses as possible to an argument. As Balthrop argued, "Perhaps the most notable wrinkle to emerge in debate practice during the late 1970's and early 1980's is the number of answers presented in the first affirmative rebuttal to disadvantages. This is, no doubt, a logical extension of the spread, but thirty-seven answers to one disadvantage as heard in one debate does seem to mark a qualitative shift in rebuttal tactics."[7] Not only has this form of the spread resulted in a proliferation of answers, but it has also led to a lack of explanation of these responses and the evidence that accompanies them. Balthrop continued: "(A) feeling seems

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

to persist in some quarters that the number of responses can compensate for a lack of explanation in answers. It is quicker, in many instances, to read three of four one-line conclusions from experts, creating the impression of concensus (sic), than to read perhaps one longer quotation which provides explanation, or reason, for a given conclusion."[8] These types of debates, particularly when all of most of arguments are sustained through rebuttals, result in what one judge referred to as "half processed information."[9] Use of the tactical spread is based upon the hope that the other team will not assimilate the information in the round in the most advantageous manner.[10] Thus, the tactical spread is also used to force the other team to misallocate its time.

While these two forms of the spread can be differentiated from one another, they are generally used together. Balthrop, for example, indicated that attempting to use the strategic spread led one team to sacrifice tactics. "As indicated in the discussion of specific issues, I am left with the impression that Samford is less responsive to specific affirmative arguments than Dartmouth is to the negative positions. Much of this, I would submit, arises from the time pressures resulting from strategic choices such as running other arguments to take up time."[11] In critiquing a different debate, Perkins, too, concluded that an attempt to sustain a strategic spread led to tactical errors. "In a debate this close, the 'persuasiveness' of the speakers and individual judgments about how the round should be put together are inevitably important. So are clarity of explanation and emphasis of superior evidence. Dartmouth chose an attack so large that brevity demanded sacrifice of some of these. A less ambitious strategy might have been better, but Kansas may well have defeated it on its merits."[12]

In addition to being used in conjuction with one another, the two forms of the spread are used to gain the same advantage--force the other team to misallocate its time. A side effect of the use of the spread, however, is that the debate becomes relatively unclear, which forces the judge to resolve the issues in the debate.

Sources of the Problem

Scholars have discussed two potential sources of the spread. First, some have suggested that judging practices are the source of the problem, while others have suggested that the format is the source of the problem. In suggesting that judges adopt the view that they are critics of argument, Balthrop indicated that this judging philosophy might deter the spread:

> The judge operating as critic or argument will not necessarily be opposed to spread debate, and adoption of the perspective will not, by itself, spell doom for the fast talking debater. Nevertheless, an emphasis upon quality of argument may shift debaters from the strategy of putting out a number of 'tag-line' answers toward one which presents fewer individual responses but which gives greater explanation as to why those responses either take-out or turnaround a disadvantage.[13]

Similarly, Reynolds suggested that increased standards of proof could partially cure the spread.[14]

While changing judges' attitudes might be the simplest solution to the misuse of the spread, there are at least two forces operating to reduce the efficacy of this approach. The first is the attitude of the judges. Arnold, for example, voted, albeit unenthusiastically, for the affirmative team he condemned for attempting to avoid debate.

Furthermore, some judges might well reject a demand that they vote against spreads. Both Pfau and Herbeck have recently critiqued debates in which they refused suggestions on the degree to which a judge should intervene in a round.[15] Second, numerous tournaments are now using a mutual preference system for judge assignment. This type of judge assignment allows teams to avoid judges who object to their strategies.[16] Thus, in and of itself, calls for judges to reject certain strategies, including the spread, are likely to fail.

Others have argued that the format of debate is responsible for the spread. Rives, for example, argued that the 10-5 format of debate resulted in the strategies that cause fragmented argumentation.[17] Brock and Fieldman explained the relationship between format and strategy more specifically when they wrote:

> Two major structural weaknesses (of debate format) are having fifteen minutes of negative speaking followed by a five minute affirmative rebuttal and allowing two thirds of the debate for the introduction of new issues as opposed to one-third for advancing arguments previously introduced.
>
> The strategic response to these characteristics has been for the negative to 'spread' the affirmative team by introducing so many arguments in the fifteen minute block that the first affirmative speaker cannot possibly provide adequate responses in a five minute rebuttal. As a further response, the first affirmative has employed a different "spread" strategy and has attempted to "shift the burden of proof" to the negative by simply outlining a case with brief authority support in his constructive speech.[18]

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Thus, a format change could also deter teams from the spread. The next section of the paper suggests such a change.

A Format Solution

While some might argue that the time limits of the speeches in a debate are sacrosanct,[19] there has always been some variation in the time limits of speeches. Prior to the development of tournament debating, time limits varied widely, including some formats that only allocated total speaking time.[20] In fact, time limits of speeches in the traditional 10-5 format developed for convenience sake when tournament debating became popular.[21] In the early 1970s tournaments used a variety of formats, including one tournament that used four different formats.[22] Finally, the Sedalia Conference on Forensics suggested that cross-examination and alternative formats might cure some of the abuses related to the spread.[23] The NDT adopted a cross-examination format not long after the conference. Thus, there has always been some variation in the time limits of debate speeches.

Both Pelsma and Brock and Fieldman suggested that the appropriate format change would be one that lengthened rebuttal speeches and shortened constructive speeches. Pelsma went so far as to suggest that rebuttal speeches should occupy at least half the time.[24] While this particular desire is probably impractical, it would seem to be beneficial to have the constructive and rebuttal speeches of approximately the same length. Thus, it is suggested that a format using eight minute constructives and seven minute rebuttals might well reduce the effects of the spread.

Discussion

An 8-7 format should reduce the strategic spread. Obviously, the number of arguments that could be presented in constructive speeches would be reduced by shortening the constructive speeches. Arguments presented solely as time wasters should be the first arguments eliminated from these speeches.

This type of format should also decrease the use of the tactical spread. Although only a change in judging standards, as Hagood and Reynolds argued,[25] can eliminate rewards for tag-line arguments, increased relative amounts of time for rebuttals generally lead to more explanation of arguments. Additionally the introduction of fewer issues in the shorter constructive speeches should also allow teams more time for explanation in rebuttals. Perhaps most importantly, the shortening of the second negative constructive speech and the lengthening of the first affirmative rebuttal speech should reduce the impossibility of presenting adequate responses in the first affirmative rebuttals, which, in turn, might encourage judges to reject an excessive number of tag-line responses in this speech. While there is no quantified evidence indicating that any of these effects would occur, personal informal observation leaves me with the impression that rebuttals improve when the rebuttals consume more than one third of each speaker's speaking time. Moreover, these effects generally lead to clearer debates.

Objections to this format might include the possibility that debaters and judges would dislike it. Wheeless, however, concluded that debaters and judges found an 8-7 format as acceptable as the other three formats, one of which was NDT format in use at the time, tested in his

experiment.[26] It is, of course, possible that debaters and judges who attended this experimental tournament were different from the general population of debaters and judges, but the current cross-examination format quickly achieved acceptability once it was adopted by the NDT.

Other variations that lengthen rebuttals at the expense of the constructives might also prove useful in reducing the lack of clarity that results from misuse of the spread. For example, the 8-4 format in CEDA might change to either a 7-5 or, possibly, a 6-6 format. Policy debate might choose to try a 9-6 format rather than an 8-7 format. Any of these formats might prove useful in reducing the use of both strategic and tactical garbage spreads.

Conclusion

Forensics scholars have been concerned with the direction of debate for some time. One focus of this concern has centered on the use of the spread. This paper suggests that one way to decrease the spread is to change the format of debate by shortening the constructive speeches and lengthening the rebuttal speeches.

[1] J.R. Pelsma, "Questionnaire on Debating," Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking, 2 (1916), 135.

[2] Bernard L. Brock and Steven D. Fieldman, "The Case Comparison Format: An Experimental Format for Intercollegiate Debate," JAFA, 9 (1973), 451.

[3] See, for example, Arthur N. Kruger, "The 'Comparitive Advantage' Case: A Disadvantage," JAFA, 3 (1966), 104-111; Tom Goodnight, Bill Balthrop, and Donn W. Parson, "The Problem of Inherency: Strategy and Substance," JAFA, 10 (1974), 229-240; Thomas J. Hynes, Jr., "Study: Hope of False Promise," JAFA, 16 (1980), 192-198; Marjorie Keeshan and Walter Ulrich, "A Critique of the Counter-Warrant as a Negative Strategy," JAFA, 16 (1980), 199-203; Michael E. Mayer and Jerold Hale, "Evaluating the Studies Counterplan: Topicality and Competitiveness," Speaker and Gravel, 16 (1979), 67-72; Michael E. Mayer, "Epistemoloigcal Considerations of the Studies Counterplan," JAFA, 19 (1983), 261-266; and Walker Smith, "Fourth Judge Critique," JAFA, 17 (1980), 54.

[4] Mark Arnold, "Last Exit from Cambridge," in The 1974 Heart of America Final Round: Text and Critiques, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Debate Squad, 1974), p. 12.

[5] Bill Balthrop, "Untitled Declamation: Or, Wonderings (Wanderings) of a Rapidly Aging Debate Judge," in 1982 Heart of America Final Round, (Lawrence: KS: University of Kansas Debate Squad, 1982), p. 8.

[6] Arnold, p. 12; See also Daniel Bozik, " Final Round Judge Critiques," JAFA, 13 (1976), 67.

[7] V. William Balthop, "The Debate Judge as 'Critic of Argument': Toward a Transcendent Prespective," JAFA, 20 (1983), 14.

[8] Balthrop, "Untitled Declamation," p. 9.

[9] Roger Solt, "Fourth Judge Critique," JAFA, 20 (1983), 59. For specific examples that tie numerous responses to a lack of reconciliation of arguments, see Jackson Harrell, "Third Judge Critique," JAFA, 15 (1978), 56; Charles Kauffman, "First Judge Critique," JAFA 19 (1982), 46; and Michael Pfau, "Fourth Judge Critique," JAFA, 19(1982), 53. For a general comment, see Theodore R. Sheckels, Jr. Debating: Applied Rhetorical Theory (New York: Longman, 1984). p. 259.

[10] This effect can be noted inferentially from statements that speakers fail to make specific extensions. For examples of critiques where this effect has been noted, see Balthop, "Untitled Declamation," p. 8; and Harrell, pp. 56-58.

[11] Balthrop, "Untitled Declamation," p. 8.

[12] Dallas Perkins, "Third Judge Critique," JAFA, 20 (1983), 58.

[13] Balthop, "The Debate Judge," p. 14.

[14] William Reynolds, "Theory and Practice in Forensics," in Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective, ed. James H. McBath (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company, 1974), pp. 114-116.

[15] Pfau, p. 53; and Dale A. Herbeck, "First Judge Critique," JAFA, 20 (1983), 52.

[16] Warren D. Decker and John T. Morello, "Some Educational Difficulties Associated with Mutual Preference Debate Judging Systems," JAFA, 20 (1984), 157.

[17] Stanley Rives, "Responses to Theory and Practice in Forensics," in Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspecive, ed. James H. McBath (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co. 1974), p. 126. See also Thomas E. Harris and Robert M. Smith, "A Systems Analysis of the Current Debate Controversy," JAFA, 9 (1973), 357.

[18] Brock and Fieldman, p. 451.

[19] Harris and Smith, pp. 355-360.

[20] Pelsma, p. 135.

[21] L. Leroy Copperthwaite and A. Craig Baird, "Intercollegiate Debating," in History of Speech Education in America: Background Studies, eds. Karl E. Wallace et al. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1954), p. 274.

[22] Brock and Fieldman, p. 452; and Lawrence R. Wheeless, "Two Surveys on Debate Format Preferences of Debaters and Coaches," JAFA, 8 (1972), 132-134. The latter article tested reactions to four different formats used in the same tournament.

[23] "Recommendations on Theory and Practice," in Forensics as Communication: An Argumentative Perspective, ed. James H. McBath (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co., 1975), p. 29.

[24] Pelsma, p. 135.

[25] Reynolds, p. 116; and Annabel Hagood, "Theory and Practice in Forensics," in Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective, ed. James H. McBath (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co, 1975) pp. 105-106.

[26] Wheeless, pp. 134.